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**Gender, number, and indefinite articles. About the «typological
inconsistency» of Italian**

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Gender, number, and indefinite articles

About the ‘typological inconsistency’ of Italian

Elisabeth Stark

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This paper discusses some typologically significant correlations in nominal determination systems found in the family of Romance languages, specifically French, Italian, and Spanish. It proposes to reinterpret the complex system of indefinite nominal determination in French and Italian, which both feature an indefinite article and a partitive article, as devices of nominal classification in a broad sense, marking the conceptually important distinction between a single, delimited referent and a non-delimited substance. It is argued that this classification system arose when nominal declension in Latin, which differentiated these two referentially highly relevant cognitive concepts via overt gender and number affixes, got partially or completely lost. In contrast to modern central Romance languages, like French, which require rather obligatory (indefinite) determination in almost every argument position and have developed indefinite articles coding countability on the level of noun phrase, modern peripheral Romance languages like Spanish allow bare arguments to a larger extent and do not possess an explicit marker of non-countability. How to position Italian in this broad typology inside the family of Romance languages will be discussed in some detail and diachronically explained by its complex evolution of its nominal paradigms.¹

1. The problem: The system of indefinite nominal determiners in Modern Standard Italian and other Romance languages

From the perspective of ‘correlative typology’, Modern Standard Italian is to be considered quite reluctant to any attempt to classify it. Körner’s attempt (1987a) to identify two morphosyntactic types inside the Romance languages, a more

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“ergative” type A with pro-drop properties, differential object marking, traces of object conjugation etc. (Portuguese, Rumanian, Sardinian, Spanish), and a more accusative type B with the opposite properties (Catalan, French, Occitan), resulted merely in affirming the typological inconsistency² of Italian: In its modern standard variety at least, it shows type A-like pro-drop characteristics, impersonal reflexives etc., but also the type B-like absence of ‘differential object marking’ and the existence of a ‘partitive article’. Especially when one tries to retrace and explain the emergence and present-day functional load of its indefinite determiner system, Italian seems to be half-way in between the strongly grammaticalized system of French indefinite determiners and the – in many positions – facultative indefinite article of Spanish. Thus, despite some well-known generalizations about the Romance system of nominal determination (e.g. Chierchia 1998; Longobardi 2001), the data in (1) demonstrate that there is considerable variation in the field of nominal indefiniteness:

- (1) a. It.: *Hai visto *(un) aquila?*
Fr.: *As-tu vu *(un) aigle?*
Sp.: *Has visto *(un) águila?*
“Did you see an eagle?”
- b. It.: *Compro (del) pane.*
Fr.: *J’achète *(du) pain.*
Sp.: *Compro pan.*
“I buy (some) bread”
- c. It.: *Mi occorre (dell’)acqua.*
Fr.: *Il me faut *(de l’)eau.*
Sp.: *Me falta agua.*
“I need (some) water”
- d. It.: *Dimostrò *(della) pazienza in questa situazione.*
Fr.: *Elle montra *(de la) patience dans cette situation.*
Sp.: *Demostró paciencia en esta situación.*
“She showed patience in this situation”
- e. It.: *Vedo (degli) studenti nell’edificio.*
Fr.: *Je vois *(des) étudiants dans le bâtiment.*
Sp.: *Veó (a unos) estudiantes en el edificio.*
“I see (some) students in the building”
- f. It.: *Escono’(degli) studenti dall’edificio.*
Fr.: *Il sorte *(des) étudiants du bâtiment.*
Sp.: *Salen estudiantes del edificio.*
“(Some) students leave the building”

2. Cf. the German title of Körner 1987b.

In Italian, French and Spanish, indefinite nominals with an existential reading show quite heterogeneous characteristics in argument position. Table 1 presents an overview over the three most frequent and grammaticalized indefinite determiners used with indefinite nominals in argument position:³

Table 1. Distribution of indefinite nominal determiners in three Romance languages

Italian	French	Spanish
‘zero’: abstract/ “mass-denoting” (non-specific): singular plural noun phrases (non-specific, mostly postverbally).	‘zero’: rarely with abstract nouns (only in more or less idiomatic expressions) no bare plural	‘zero’: abstract/“mass-denoting”, rarely: “entity-denoting” nouns (non-specific): singular plural noun phrases (mostly postverbally)
<i>uno</i> : singular countable noun phrases	<i>un</i> : singular countable noun phrases	<i>uno</i> : singular countable noun phrases
<i>del</i> : “mass-denoting” in non-countable singular noun phrases plural noun phrases (specific)	<i>du</i> : abstract/“mass-denoting” in non-countable singular noun phrases plural noun phrases in argument position outside the scope of negation	no ‘partitive article’

Modern Standard Italian, on the one hand, shares some important characteristics with Spanish: Bare noun phrases in argument position occur in both languages under restricted grammatical conditions: in fact, only abstract nouns can appear freely in bare noun phrases in argument position even in the singular (cf. 1d); bare plurals surface postverbally in subject and object position independently of the lexical category of the noun (with non-specific interpretation of the nominal, cf. 1e and 1f; for the interaction of the ‘prepositional accusative’ and specificity in Spanish cf. Leonetti 2003 and von Heusinger/Kaiser 2004; for non-specific interpretation of definite noun phrases in French and Italian see Kupisch/Koops, this volume). Bare singulars are possible with “mass-denoting nouns” in postverbal subjects and objects (see 1b and 1c), again with non-specific interpretation of the nominal. Conversely, the only Romance language which almost never permits bare noun phrases in argument position is French.

3. Including ‘zero’ as a possible null determiner for the sake of a similar underlying syntactic structure.

On the other hand, Modern Standard Italian shares one peculiar element inside the paradigm of indefinite determiners with French, i.e. the so-called 'partitive (article)' (cf. Renzi 1991). As for overt indefinite nominal determination, every Romance language possesses an indefinite article derived from the Latin numeral *unus*, 'one', which accompanies singular count noun phrases. The second indefinite determiner in Italian and French derived from the composition of Latin *de* and the definite article. It marks indefinite non-countable singular noun phrases, usually with "mass-denoting nouns", in pre- and postverbal subjects and objects. So as for the paradigm of indefinite determiners, Italian and French are different from Spanish (and the majority of the other Romance languages) in that they both possess a 'partitive article'. Yet, Italian seems to have grammaticalized this item to a lesser extent than French, given the fact that it is obligatory with abstract nouns in French, but only optional in Italian (see examples in 1b, 1c and 1d); the same holds for the morphological 'plural partitive', which functionally and distributionally represents the indefinite plural article⁴ and which is fully grammaticalized in French and optional in Italian. Table 2 gives an overview over the particular position of Italian between French and Spanish:

Table 2. The Italian system of indefinite nominal determination in comparison to Spanish and French

Italian	Spanish	French
1. bare singulars	+	–
2. bare singulars with "mass-denoting nouns"	+	–
3. bare singulars with abstract nouns	+	–
4. bare plurals (postverbally)	+	–
5. optional 'partitive article' for non-countable NPs ("mass-denoting nouns")	–	+
6. optional 'plural partitive article'	–	+

2. Correlations

In order to explain the striking differences between French, Italian and Spanish concerning the possibility of permitting bare plurals or bare ('mass') singulars in argument position, the following correlation has often been observed (cf. e.g. Schroten 2001): the almost complete loss of overt morphological number marking in French nouns seems to correlate with the necessity of number marking via determiners

4. Just like *uno*, it combines preferably with "entity-denoting nouns" and does not indicate non-countability, but rather specificity.

for arguments. In Spanish, the number feature is considered interpretable in certain contexts via consistent plural marking through *s*-affixation, thus allowing for bare nouns with indefinite interpretation. However, even if this correlation explains the degree of how obligatory explicit nominal determination in argument position is in French, it is not precise enough to explain the considerably different behaviour of Italian in this respect, as I have already argued elsewhere (cf. Stark 2005 and forthcoming a). Italian exhibits morphological number marking also in its spoken varieties, but has a quite restricted distribution of bare NPs (recall (1a–f)), and, like French but unlike Spanish, it possesses a 'partitive article'. This is an important hint at the fact that there might be more to an adequate explanation than just the problem of overt morphological number marking in Romance.

The first correlation mentioned above and frequently observed in the traditional literature (cf. Tekavčić 1972) relates nominal morphology and (indefinite) nominal determination in a diachronic perspective, in order to relate the loss of Latin case marking on nominals to the rise of (normally the definite) article in Romance ('compensation hypothesis').⁵ Now, this diachronic correlation is highly improbable, since the marking of syntactic functions is achieved via prepositional marking and word order in Romance, and it is empirically not corroborated (cf. the findings in Selig 1992 – on nominal determiners in Late Latin – occurring with equal probability in all syntactic functions, though preferably postverbally). However, the morphosyntactic categories of number and, maybe even more so, of gender, seem to play a major role not only synchronically, but also for the specific development of the different systems of Romance indefinite determiners. In fact, the second, but not the first phenomenon, i.e. the existence of a 'partitive article', seems to correlate with unambiguous plural marking via agglutinative affixes, whereas the tolerance for bare arguments correlates with the degree to which the Latin neuter (plural) is morphologically preserved in the different Romance languages (cf. Stark forthcoming a).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 3 will give an overview over the Latin and Modern Romance (Italian, French, Spanish) nominal morphology with respect to gender and number marking. Section 4 will add data from Old Italian (Old Tuscan⁶ and partly Old French), retracing in particular the development of the 'partitive article'. Section 5 will try to establish a functional explanation of the observed synchronic correlations and the diachronic development by focussing the central role of Latin gender- and number marking and

5. See Selig 1992, 23f., for a critical overview of the main accounts of the subject.

6. Given the fact that Modern Standard Italian is mainly based on the variety of Florence of the 14th century with its outstanding classics, the so-called "Tre Corone" Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarca.

its loss for the grammaticalization of the indefinite and the 'partitive article' in some Romance languages and varieties, especially in Italian.

Central to this functional explanation will be the notion of 'countability'. In fact, the so-called 'partitive article' in French has repeatedly been categorized as a kind of 'nominal classifier', indicating non-countability as opposed to the indefinite article (cf. Herslund 1998). In order to account for the specific case of Italian and following Löbel (1993: 192ff.) and contrary to the conceptual system proposed by Herslund, I assume a fundamental difference between the lexical noun categories "mass-denoting", "entity-denoting" and "abstract noun" (N), which derive from characteristics of the potential (extra-linguistic) referents (mainly additivity, divisibility, cf. Krifka 1991; Behrens 1995) and which are based on denotational properties of the head noun, and the countability or non-countability of entire noun phrases. This last opposition is a grammatical category or better a semantic feature interacting with the internal syntactic structure of the noun phrase and it is characterized by the (in)compatibility with certain *indefinite determiners* (French/Italian: *uno* vs. *del*). This assumption is justified by the fact that virtually any noun in Romance languages (like in any language with a grammaticalized countability distinction in this sense) can in principle appear in any kind of noun phrase. See (2a–b):

- (2) a. It.: *Hai mangiato (dell') aquila?*
Fr.: *As-tu mangé de l'aigle?*
Sp.: *Has comido águila?*
"Did you eat (some) eagle (meat)?"
- b. It.: *Compro un pane.*
Fr.: *J'achète un pain.*
Sp.: *Compro un pan.*
"I buy one (a certain amount/piece of) bread"

Even if these examples seem semantically marked,⁷ due to prototypical affinities between "mass-denoting nouns" (like engl. *bread*) with non-countability, and between "entity-denoting nouns" (like engl. *eagle*) with countability (as discussed for English as early as in Allan 1980), they are grammatically well-formed and their 'mass' or 'count' readings derive from the prenominal indefinite determiners ('zero', 'partitive' or indefinite article).

7. Cf. Behrens 1995: 47–50, Corbett 2000: 86f.; see also the sortal interpretation or "Artenplural" mentioned by Krifka 1991: 414f. for "mass-denoting nouns" in countable plural NPs and the unique meaning of the morphological plural in languages with grammaticalized countability: it is always understood as additive, "diskrete Gesamtheiten von Objekten derselben Art" (Link 1991: 418).

3. Latin and Romance nominal morphology

3.1 Latin

Classical Latin possessed a complex declension system divided into 5 declension classes; all nouns required obligatory and overt marking of the morpho-grammatical categories case, gender and number. There were 5 (6) morphological cases, 3 genders, and 2 numbers, singular and plural. Even though clear-cut correspondences between gender, declension class, and 'semantic' or lexical noun class cannot be assumed (in contrast to the situation suggested for Proto-Indo-European; cf. Ralli 2002), there was some systematic 'lexical motivation' for nouns sharing the same lexical root, but differing in gender and/or number. See (3a–c):

- (3) a. *caseus*, 'one single (piece of) cheese',
olea, 'olive'/'olive tree'
- b. *caseum*, 'cheese as a substance',
oleum, 'oil'
- c. *acinus/acinum*, 'berry',
acina, 'grape'
frumentum, 'wheat',
frumenta, 'corn'⁸
pilus, 'one single hair'
pila, 'hair, collective'⁹

(3a) shows lexical roots with masculine and feminine gender, resulting in "entity-denoting nouns", whereas the nouns from the same root in (3b) with neuter gender are "mass-denoting nouns". In addition, (3c) shows the well-known 'collective' semantics of the Latin neuter plural ending in *-a* (cf. Schön 1971; Windisch 1973; Tichy 1993). Although these oppositions do not cover the whole range of possible lexical denotations, the Latin neuter and especially the Latin neuter plural in *-a* – both unambiguously marked in spoken and written varieties – can be re-interpreted as a partly generalised 'classification system' denoting mainly the opposition between 'single, delimited, individuated object' (e.g. one piece of cheese, one olive, one berry, one single hair) and 'non-delimited substance' (e.g. cheese, oil) or 'collective' (grape, hair).¹⁰

8. Cf. in detail Hofmann (1997: 7–10), Meisterfeld (1998: 56ff.), and for late Latin analogical neuter plurals following the same pattern cf. Morani (2000: 228).

9. Klingenschmitt 1992, 90.

10. Compare similar observations concerning the loss of multiple gender in Germanic in Leiss 1994.

That this important semantic opposition is at least as much related to gender as to number is shown by the fact that, unlike the plural in modern Indo-European languages, including the Romance languages, the Latin plural is neither automatically interpreted as additive (cf. Link 1991) nor restricted to "entity-denoting nouns". See (4a–b):

- (4) a. *frigora caloresque*, 'an intense heat and cold': plural indicating intensification
 b. *acquae*, 'waters', *cerae*, 'wax tablets': different appearances of a substance¹¹

Although the Latin plural can have a sortal reading, bare plurals of abstract or "mass denoting-nouns" are not automatically re-categorized as for instance in modern Romance languages (compare Fr. *huile*, 'oil', *des huiles*, 'different sorts of oil'). Virtually any Latin noun can be pluralized, and in fact frequent occurrences of plurals of "mass-denoting nouns" or abstract nouns, as in (4) above, are attested.¹² This fact, together with the absence of compatibility restrictions for (optional) indefinite determiners with nouns (Lat. *quidam* or *aliquis* combine freely with abstract, "mass-denoting" and "entity-denoting nouns") indicates that Latin had no grammaticalized "countability distinction" at the level of noun phrases (cf. Löbel 1993).

If Latin inflectional affixes, which mark declension class, gender and number, indicate oppositions between 'delimited single object', 'substance' and 'collective', they can be considered as classification devices in the following sense: They are part of the universal dimension of nominal apprehension, which is a central universal operation of establishing *reference*:

First of all, so it seems, one has to be able to express that something is a thing [= dimension of APPREHENSION, E.S.]. Only then can it be named: The dimension of NAMING [. . .] Following that, it can be referenced: The dimension of DETERMINATION. (Seiler 1986: 9)

APPREHENSION is the universal operational dimension with corresponding subdimensions which explicate the grasping and representation of concepts corresponding to objects or things by means of language. (Seiler 1986: 145)

Consequently, apprehension concerns chiefly the classification of the denotation of the noun phrase as "an undifferentiated concept or as an individual" (Lehmann 1991: 206, see also Meisterfeld 2000: 328).

11. Cf. Kühner/Stegmann (³1955: 69, 73), Hofmann (²1997: 18, 21).

12. Cf. Iturrioz Leza (1986: 295f.): "This individualization strategy [= pluralization of abstract nouns, E.S.] is more widespread in the classical languages (Greek, Latin) than in Modern German or any other European language; thus it is often difficult to translate an abstract [plural, E.S.] NP without changing its number: [. . .] *Asperitates viarum et angustiae* [. . .] 'The roughness(es) and narrowness(es) of the ways.'"

3.2 French, Spanish – and Italian

The main morphological changes in the nominal system from Latin to Romance are well-known and comprise the complete loss of morphological case (with the exception of Rumanian), a reduction of gender (especially the loss of the neuter, but see below), contrasted with a solid formal preservation of number, but with only the 'additive plural meaning' left.

In addition, Modern Standard French shows the complete loss of the declension classes (already in Old French, cf. Delfitto/Schroten 1991: 180f.). Gender and number are usually marked (in the phonetic code) only by prenominal determiners. See (5):

- (5) *un ami/une amie* – *des ami(e)s*
 [œnami/ynami – dezami]
 'a male friend'/'a female friend' 'male or female friends'¹³

The French noun [ami] is thus not phonetically marked at all for gender or number.

Just like Italian and unlike French, Modern (European) Standard Spanish has 3 main declension classes, 2 overtly marked genders and overt number marking. Its morphological nominal morphology is "heterogeneous with respect to gender" (Harris 1992: 66ff.), but unambiguous with respect to number marking ("plurality is manifested consistently by the suffix /-s/"; Harris 1992: 67):

- (6) Sg.: -o/-a/-el;
 Pl.: -s:
 a. *pas-o* – *pas-os* (m.) *man-o* – *man-os* (f.),
 'step' – 'steps' 'hand' – 'hands';
 b. *pas-a* – *pas-as* (f.) *map-a* – *map-as* (m.),
 'raisin' – 'raisins' 'map' – 'maps';
 c. *jef-e* – *jef-es* (m.) *nub-e* – *nub-es* (f.),
 'chief' – 'chiefs' 'cloud' – 'clouds'

However, there seems to be no 'classification potential' in nominal (declensional) endings in the morphological setup of Spanish nouns.¹⁴ The only slight systematic 'classification potential' left in Spanish is a kind of 'neuter' (deriving from the Latin neuter singular) in the pronominal system marking 'abstract antecedents', such as

13. Illustration gleaned from Delfitto/Schroten (1991: 177ff.).

14. A possible exception might be the -o-a-alternation with the same stem indicating size in *el bolso* ('the handbag') – *la bolsa* ('the (bigger) bag') or *el cubo* ('the bucket') – *la cuba* ('the wine cask'), but this is not or not clearly retraceable to the functional load of the Latin neuter indicated in Section 3.1.

quotations. Spanish personal pronouns and demonstratives show a threefold morphological opposition, with forms ending in *-e* for masculine singular, *-a* for feminine singular and *-o* for the so-called 'neuter' (e.g. span.: *este/esta/esto: lo que me interesa es esto. . .* 'what I am interested in is the following: . . .' vs. *él que me interesa es este hombre* 'who I am interested in is this man').

By contrast, Modern Standard Italian is different from French and quite similar to Spanish in having preserved 3 main declension classes, 2 overtly marked genders as well as overt number marking. However, and this is a crucial point, the declensional endings *-a* and *-e* are far from being unambiguous markers of singular or plural, as they can either indicate feminine singular, (rarely) masculine singular or feminine plural (*-a*) or masculine singular or feminine plural (*-e*). The morpheme *-o* unambiguously indicates singular, but both masculine and (rarely) feminine gender. See (7a–c):

- (7) Sg.: *-o/ -a/ -e*;
Pl.: *-i/ -a/ -e*:
- | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| a. | <i>libr-o – libr-i</i> (m.) | <i>mano – mani</i> (f.) | <i>bracci-o – bracci-a</i> (m. – f.), |
| | 'book' – 'books' | 'hand' – 'hands' | 'arm' – 'arms'; |
| b. | <i>cas-a – cas-e</i> (f.) | <i>poet-a – poet-i</i> (m.), | |
| | 'house' – 'houses' | 'poet' – 'poets'; | |
| c. | <i>can-e – can-i</i> (m.) | | |
| | 'dog' – 'dogs' | | |

What is marked in bold characters in (7a) is a residue of the original Latin classification potential of the neuter plural in *-a*, as opposed to a regular plural form in *-i* (originating in Late Latin, cf. Hofmann (1997): 21) and reanalysed as feminine (but still plural!), always indicating a collective or at least 'pair' reading. Some nouns ending in *-o* (masculine singular), usually denoting concrete objects like body parts (It.: *ginocchio* 'knee', *orecchio* 'ear' and so on, also *muro* 'wall' etc.), have a plural form in *-a* when denoting a plurality, body parts or a 'collective reading'. However, they form a plural in *-i* when used metaphorically to denote something similar in form, but without a collective denotation (e.g. It.: *le braccia* denotes both arms of an animate being, whereas *i bracci* denotes the arms of a river, It. *le mura* denotes the townwall, whereas *i muri* denotes the single walls of a building).

Having a closer look at some Italian dialects as well as at older stages of Italo-Romance, especially in the central-southern area (parts of Lazio, in Campania, especially in Umbria and in the Marche), the Latin neuter plural in *-a* and even forms in *-ora* (e.g. *castella* 'castels', *locora* 'places') are more lively and widespread than in Standard Italian or Northern Italian dialects, a fact which can easily be retraced from the medieval texts on (remember one of the oldest Italian documents, the wall-writings in the catacombs of Comodilla near Rome: *non dicere illa secreta a bboce*, 'do not say these secrets aloud', from the 9th century against

Northern dialect forms such as *castele* instead of (Old) Tuscan *castela*, 'castels' etc.). Besides the pure formal continuation of the Latin neuter plural in *-a*, there is also still a 'neuter singular', for definite determiners, personal pronouns, and nouns, especially in Umbria (in addition partly in Asturias, cf. Hall 1968; Haase 2000), which is to indicate non-countability (cf. Haase 2000: 225). Thus, while *lu pane* in Central Italian dialects denotes an individuated, delimited piece or loaf of bread, *lo pane* in the same dialects denotes the substance of bread (cf. Haase 2000: 222). Formally, the second form of the article derives from the Latin neuter, but functionally, the systematic indication of non-countability via prenominal definite determiners¹⁵ is an innovation (cf. Haase 2000: 228). Important for our focus on indefinite determiners as potential classifiers is the following point: In Romance areas and dialects with a special form of the definite determiner for non-countability, there is no trace of any 'partitive article'.

4. A short history of the 'partitive article'

Typically, the main texts of the Old Tuscan period (traditionally set from the origins to 1375, i.e. Boccaccio's death) show a considerably high tendency to preserve the old Latin neuter plural forms in *-a*, to a much larger extent than modern Standard Italian. Thus, we find *anella* much more often than *anelli* ('rings') in *Novellino*, *Convivio*, *Decameron* etc., *castella* or *mulina* ('castels', 'mills') instead of the rare forms *castelli* or *mulini*, today totally unmarked, in the *Decameron* etc., *tempora* (today: *tempi*) in the *Decameron*, *luogora* for modern *luoghi* ('places') in the *Novellino*, and so on and so forth (cf. for details Rohlf 1968: 39f.). All these forms have a clearcut collective meaning, deriving more or less directly from the old Indo-European formations in *-a* (cf. already Brugmann 1897, Jespersen 1924) and the core of the Latin neuter plural forms (cf. for example Hofmann 1997, 9ff.). Additionally, some feminine nouns without this collective meaning (*donna*, 'woman' or 'women', *capra*, 'goose' or 'geese' etc.) had (and still have) a plural form in *-a* in (Old) Tuscan, being thus absolutely homophonous with their singular forms. The same holds for (phonetically regular) plural forms like *i cane* ('the dogs', deriving from lat. *canes*), identical to the masculine singular *lo cane*, or *le chiave* ('the keys', deriving from lat. *claves*), identical to the feminine singular *la chiave*, and rather widespread in Old Tuscan texts – just like the majority of French

15. With the exception of etymologically and formally feminine nouns like Umbrian *la paja*, 'straw', cf. Haase 2000: 225.

nouns from the 13th century on (cf. Rohlfs 1968: 28f.). In sum, we find the same endings on nouns as in Modern Standard Italian (see above, Section 3.2), i.e. *-o* (masculine singular), *-a* (singular or plural, 'collective' or 'individual', feminine), *-i* (masculine and/or feminine plural), and *-e* (singular or plural, both feminine or masculine), but with an even increased heterogeneity and homonymy both according to number and gender marking.

Comparing this "heterogeneous inflectional marking system" to Old French (or Old Occitan), we can still observe the above mentioned discrepancy in inflectional gender and number marking already realised in the Middle Ages. Old French could not distinguish, for example, between nominative singular (*casus rectus*) and accusative plural forms (*casus obliquus*) for more than 50 percent of its nouns (cf. Buridant 2000: 73), unless it used (definite) determiners, especially for masculine nouns (*li murs* – *lo/le murs*, 'the wall_{NOM}' – 'the walls_{ACC}', *la flors* – *les flors*, 'the flower_{NOM}' – 'the flowers_{ACC}'). This contrasts sharply with the fact that contiguous Western Romance languages like Spanish had consistently reanalysed and preserved the originally case-marking *s*-ending as an unambiguous plural marker.

We will not discuss here the problem of case-marking in Old French (cf. Schöslér 2001), but rather concentrate on gender and number marking according to the above mentioned correlations with the indefinite nominal determiners and in order to retrace their history. What is interesting in this context is the coincidence, in the history of French, of the loss of the phonetic realization of final *s*-endings and the rise of the 'partitive article' – both occur in the 12th and 13th century, the partitive (singular) with postverbal objects (cf. Buridant 2000: 119). The first attestations of the partitive as an indefinite determiner in Old French occur systematically with "mass-denoting nouns" in postverbal object position of verbs like *avoir*, 'to have', *boire*, 'to drink', *donner*, 'to give' *mangier*, 'to eat' etc. (cf. Englebert 1989) in non-generic sentences. In the same period, the indefinite article *un* is only found with "entity-denoting nouns" (cf. Carlier/Goyens 1998). Plural occurrences of the partitive are found from the 13th century on. The widening of the contexts in which the partitive article occurs starts in Middle French (from the 15th century on), showing the first occurrences in subject (usually with plural noun phrases), later also in predicative position.¹⁶ All these findings strongly corroborate Leiss' (2000) hypothesis concerning the original motivation of article grammaticalization: Articles start out as indicators of the gestalt of the intended referent denoted

16. For this and the following, please remember that the morphological plural of the partitive article is not functionally a partitive, but rather a normal indefinite plural article, cf. Section 1.

by the respective nominal inside the VP, because the nature of the complements of V is crucial for the conceptualization of the whole event (durative, perfective, imperfective). If the complement NPs or DPs are not marked via gender and/or number as denoting 'substance' or an 'individual', 'shaped entity', the event they are involved in is less clearly perceivable either as perfective or imperfective (compare French *nous avons mangé un fromage* 'we ate a/one cheese' with *nous avons mangé du fromage* 'we ate cheese').

In order to compare this situation with Old Tuscan and to relate it to the restructuring of the Italian morphology in comparison to Latin, it is interesting to investigate the first attestations, the distribution and further development of the partitive article in two of the three above mentioned texts of the Old Tuscan/Old Italian period, and additionally in a later, epigonal collection of novellas: The anonymous *Novellino*, a collection of 100 novellas from the end of the 13th century; Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, written in its major parts from 1348 on; and Masuccio Salernitanos *Novellino*, written between 1440–1475/76. These three collections of novellas, though forming only a small corpus of about 430.000 words, guarantee a wide comparability as to text type, content, discourse traditional factors, and dialectal homogeneity (Tuscan, with slight Northern and Southern influences) and are at the same time well-known representatives of three subsequent centuries.¹⁷

The partitive article is distributed as follows in the three texts:

Table 3. Occurrences of the partitive article in the three corpus texts

	Singular	Plural
<i>Novellino</i>	2	–
<i>Decameron</i>	13	16
Masuccio	2	4

While the partitive is only attested twice in the *Novellino*, and only in the singular as a real non-countability indicator, it is Boccaccio who establishes its use, in the singular and plural form, and Masuccio seems to refrain again from this non-countability marker. Masuccio is from Campania, one of the dialectal zones having preserved and re-functionalized the Latin neuter (see above, Section 3.2) – and even if he tries to copy Boccaccio's Tuscan style, his Southern origin might have inhibited the frequent use of an unfamiliar grammatical element.

17. Narrative texts are chosen because the Romance 'partitive article' shows a considerable statistical affinity to this text type, cf. Stark 2006, Chapter 7.5.3.

Table 4 shows the distribution of *uno*, the partitive singular and plural and 'zero' according to the semantic class of the noun:

Table 4. *Uno*, the partitive and 'zero' with "mass-denoting nouns", abstract nouns and inanimate referents¹⁸

	uno		partitive		'zero'	
Singular						
mass	11	1,90%	13	76,47%	31	23,66%
abstract	190	32,82%	2	11,76%	79	60,31%
inanimate	369	63,73%	17	100,00%	116	88,55%
Σ	579		17		131	
Plural						
mass			–	–	–	–
abstract			6	30,00%	49	34,51%
inanimate			19	95,00%	109	76,76%
Σ			20		142	

These data indicate quite clearly that the partitive singular is specialized on "mass-denoting nouns" (76,47% of its occurrences in the three texts of the corpus), while 'zero' typically marks abstract nouns (60,31%), and *uno* much more likely abstract (32,82%) than "mass-denoting nouns" (1,90%) in the singular. *Uno* has also the lowest percentage for inanimate referents, something which hints at its status as a specificity marker (see below) in these periods. Inanimateness is the main domain of the partitive singular again – non-countability would in fact be difficult to conceive for animate beings. The table shows furthermore the parallel distribution of *uno* and the partitive plural; especially the numbers for abstract nouns are almost identical (32,82% for *uno*, 30,00% for the partitive plural). The partitive plural shows a higher compatibility with inanimate referents, but is also conceivable with animates and even humans. "Mass-denoting nouns" are thus usually marked either by 'zero' or by the partitive article in all three texts, whereas abstract nouns do not show any significant preference for a particular indefinite determiner. One important exception here is a kind of 'conversion' in Masuccio with the partitive:

- (8) *Unde, a nui tornando, dico che non multo [lontano] da la città, de la quale quanto*

18. The three semantic classes enumerated one below the other in the leftmost column are of course not orthogonal. Both the referents of "mass-denoting nouns" and abstract nouns are usually inanimate, so that the numbers cannot be straightforwardly summed up to 100%.

sia piacevole il luoco, il nome in parte lo dimostra, [era una villetta], ne la quale non è gran tempo che essendo un preite, donno Battimo nominato, il quale, ancora che de villa fosse, pur del prattico e de l'intendente avea. . .

"Where, while night is falling, I say that not very far from the city whose location was also very nice and whose name partly shows this, there was a little village, in which, not long ago, lived a priest, named donno Battimo, who, despite being of rural origin, had something practical and intelligent. . ."

(Masuccio, V)

Masuccio effectuates in this example a nominalization of two abstract adjectives, *prattico* and *intendente*, via nominal determination through the partitive article. The effect is a 'substance' or 'property reading', whereas *uno* would have created an 'individual reading' ('a practical person' or something similar). This can be considered a rather clear indication of the available function of the partitive as an indicator of non-countability of the respective nominal.

Table 5 and 6 illustrate the interaction of the two fundamental denotational categories for article grammaticalization, i.e. countability and specificity (more or less informally defined hereafter as reference to 'a particular x', usually highly 'foregrounded referents' in the text (cf. Stark 2002). At the very beginning of its grammaticalization towards an indefinite article and countability indicator, the numeral *unus/uno* occurs only with specific referents in definite NPs in real partitive constructions ('one of the x'). While becoming a countability marker on its own via implicature (if an element can be introduced as one out of a set, it is countable), *uno* can leave these highly specific contexts and appear also in non-specific ones – and this is in turn an indicator of its high degree of grammaticalization, because in non-specific contexts, the assertion of a set containing only one element is usually irrelevant (consider *If I meet a/one doctor, I will ask him. . .*).¹⁹ At this point, the original implicational relation between countability and specificity has been reversed: While explicit nominal indefinite determination is at the beginning of article grammaticalization always limited to contexts of specificity, marking sometimes also (non-)countability, in languages with fully grammaticalized nominal determination, (non-)countability is, in the indefinite case, always marked, also in non-specific contexts.

In order to identify then the grammaticalization stage our Old and Middle Tuscan texts have to be located in, with special respect to the partitive article and the 'classification system' in the singular via indefinite nominal determination, we

19. Cf. Carlier/Goyens 1998, 106, for Old French.

now have a look at Table 5 and 6, which permits to explain particularly well the above mentioned unexpected occurrences of *uno* with “mass-denoting nouns” and abstract nouns:

Table 5. *Uno*, partitive and ‘zero’ in singular nominals with central and non-central “mass-denoting nouns”, abstract nouns and inanimate referents

Singular	uno		partitive		‘zero’	
mass	11	1,90%	13	76,47%	31	23,66%
central	2	18,18%	–	–	–	–
abstract	190	32,82%	2	11,76%	79	60,31%
central	22	11,58%	–	–	–	–
inanimate	369	63,73%	17	100,00%	116	88,55%
central	36	9,76%	–	–	–	–
Σ	579		17		131	

Table 6. *Uno*, partitive singular and plural, ‘zero’ with singular and plural NPs with perfectly marked verbs, in pre- and postverbal position, and in postverbal direct objects of perfectly marked verbs²⁰

	uno		partsg.		partpl.		‘zero’sg		‘zero’pl	
perf.	246	42,49%	3	17,65%	1	5,00%	87	29,00%	77	25,67%
prev.+perf.	75	12,95%	–	–	–	–	36	12,00%	33	11,00%
postv.+perf.	171	29,58%	3	17,65%	1	5,00%	51	17,00%	44	14,67%
po.+perf+dO	43	17,55%	3	100,0%	–	–	6	6,90%	11	14,29%
Σ	579		17		20		300		300	

Table 5 shows clearly that part of the unexpected occurrences of *uno* with “mass-denoting nouns” (18,18%) or abstract nouns (11,58%) are due to the thematic centrality (important object in the history or else) of the respective referent, whereas neither the partitive nor ‘zero’ are able to assume this function in our early texts. Here, the opposition between ‘zero’ = non-specific/background and *uno* = specific/foreground still seems to hold partly. Consider (9) as an illustration.

- (9) *Lo re mandò per maestri e fecela spezzare, e trovaro nella detta pietra un vermine. Allora lodò il greco d’oltremirabile senno, et istabiliò che un pane intero li fosse dato per giorno, alla spese di sua corte.*
 “The king called for some experts and made them destroy the stone, and inside

20. Again, these categories are not mutually exclusive; in Italian, perfective aspect is morphologically marked in the past tenses through the opposition *passato remoto*, perfective, and *imperfetto*, imperfective.

the stone they found a worm. Therefore he praised the Greek man for his outstanding wisdom, and gave order that a whole loaf of bread would be given to him, every day, and he would pay it.”
 (Novellino, p.127)

Here, we can see the typical ‘recategorization effect’ already in the 13th century. Together with *intero* ‘whole’, *pane* has to be determined by *uno* – and its role in the novella is, additionally, of central importance.

Table 6 shows furthermore the exclusive distribution of the partitive singular in postverbal direct objects in perfective contexts – another ‘specificity indicator’ (cf. Stark 2002). These findings both seem to allude to a quite early grammaticalization state of our indefinite determiners, where they would still be highly restricted to specificity contexts. ‘Zero’ would accordingly be the normal marking of the non-specific interpretation of nominals and would be in general possible for plural NPs or DPs due to rather clear inflectional number marking in Old and Middle Tuscan.

However, the findings for ‘zero’ do not fully corroborate this diagnostics. A detailed analysis²¹ shows that, besides an almost identical distribution to Old French for the different syntactic functions of the partitive and especially the first occurrences of the partitive plural in subject rather than object position, ‘zero’ is almost equally distributed over argument and non-argument positions in the Old Tuscan texts with singular and plural nominals. The same holds for ‘zero’ in our tables: it occurs for example with inanimate referents with similar frequency in the singular (88,55%) and in the plural (76,76%, see above, Table 4). It occurs significantly less frequent with abstract nouns in the plural (34,51%) than in the singular (60,31%). Taken together, all of this excludes the possibility that the Old and Middle Tuscan system of indefinite nominal determination would still be in an early grammaticalization stage with typically less determination in the plural than in the singular. Number marking alone is no longer enough for nominals to appear in argument position, because the value of ‘zero’, especially in the singular, is no longer reduced to indicate non-specificity or non-referentiality. As a part of the new central Romance ‘classification system’, ‘zero’ in the singular now marks abstract nouns.

5. A functional explanation: Grammaticalizing countability

How can we now functionally relate these synchronic and diachronic morphosyntactic findings to the problem of the different indefinite determiner systems in the Romance languages?

21. Cf. Stark 2006, Chapter 7.5.3.

Modern Standard French shows a complete re-analysis, a complete loss of the Latin neuter plural in *-a*, an evolution widely completed already in Old French: Lat. neuter plural *folia* becomes Fr. *la feuille*, feminine singular, just like Lat. feminine singular *femina* becomes Fr. *la femme*. While this happened already from Vulgar Latin to Old French, number marking via *s*-affixation gets reduced and lost until the 12th or 13th century. From then on, French nouns show almost no marking of gender and/or number. This loss of the Latin 'classification system' via noun morphology is compensated for by the simultaneous evolution of an obligatory 'classification system' via indefinite determiners (cf. Herslund 1998: 70ff.): 'zero determination' nowadays is practically excluded in argument position; the indefinite singular article, *un*, marks 'contour', 'individualized referent', and thus countability; the 'partitive article' *du*, appearing in the 13th century, marks 'substance', 'diffuse' (mass/abstract), and thus non-countability. See (10a–b):

- (10) a. Lat.: *caseus* Fr. *un fromage* 'one single (piece of) cheese'
 b. Lat.: *caseum* Fr. *du fromage* 'cheese as a substance'

This situation differs considerably from the situation in (Modern Standard) Spanish. Here, we find a partial preservation of the Latin neuter, unambiguous plural marking via *s*-affixation, but no 'classification potential' inside the indefinite determination system. 'Zero' can mean 'abstract/mass', even (rarely) "entity-denoting", besides the additional possibility of marking non-specificity (cf. Laca 1999). The indefinite article, *un(o)*, less grammaticalized than in French or Italian, marks 'contour', 'individualized referent' and thus countability. However, there is no explicit marking of non-countability and therefore no unambiguous simple obligatory classification system (cf. Herslund 1998: 70–72).

Modern Standard Italian shows some residue of the Latin neuter plural in *-a* with a certain 'classification potential' and overt, yet ambiguous, plural marking. However, it also has a French-like 'classification system' via indefinite determiners: 'zero' is partially permitted, but exclusively only for abstract/plural noun phrases; the indefinite article, *uno*, marks 'contour', 'individualized referent', and thus countability, just as in French. The 'partitive article', *del*, less grammaticalized than in French, marks 'substance' ('mass', as opposed to 'abstract') and thus non-countability.

The diachronic data presented in Section 4 above corroborate the hypothesis that the establishment of a 'classification system' via indefinite determiners in central Romance languages, more precisely the grammaticalization of countability as a feature of whole noun phrases via determiner selection and its overt marking, is to be linked to the loss of the Latin number and gender marking system. Losing the unambiguous plural marking and partly an unambiguous gender marking

system already in Old Tuscan, Early Italian starts out by grammaticalizing in the same period an element marking 'substance', non-countability. In contrast to (Old) French, it still possesses the possibility of phonetically marking singular and plural and is thus able to integrate 'zero' in its classification system in the singular. See Table 7:

Table 7. Synopsis of the morphological and syntactic evolution of French and Italian indefinite nominals

	Latin/'Old Romance'	> 13th century	13th – 15th century	15th century <
Italian		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – loss of the Latin neuter; – preservation of overt number marking via vocalic endings (allomorphy); – no 'partitive article' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – strong allomorphy in inflectional gender and plural marking; – considerable increase of attestations of the 'partitive article', mostly postverbally and only with "mass-denoting nouns" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – partial reduction of nominal allomorphy (normative pressure); – further widening of syntactic contexts for the 'partitive article', only with "mass-denoting nouns"
French	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – overt gender/number marking; – optional nominal determination with <i>unus</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – loss of the Latin neuter; – partial preservation of gender distinctions via case inflection; – preservation of overt number marking via final <i>-s</i> (in <i>casus obliquus</i>); – (almost) no 'partitive article' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – loss of gender/number marking in the spoken varieties; – considerable increase of attestations of the 'partitive article', mostly postverbally and with "mass-denoting nouns" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – complete loss of gender/number marking in the spoken varieties; – obligatorification of the 'partitive article' with indefinite plural, "mass-denoting nouns" and abstract nouns

In conclusion, we see that both, gender and number marking, are in Latin important devices to code the dimension of apprehension, i.e. to indicate the intended gestalt of the text referent to the hearer/reader. In this perspective, the rise of indefinite determination in the Romance languages has to be related to the loss of the complex Latin nominal morphology. It is the expression of an (ongoing) 'countability grammaticalization' in Romance (see also the reduction of the different meanings

of the Latin plural to an exclusively additive reading in Meisterfeld 2000). Whereas Latin nouns could have a phonologically expressed feature not only of the morphological plural, just like most of the modern Romance languages as Spanish, they could also have a phonologically expressed feature 'countability' of the intended referent via gender marking. This second feature has lost its overt phonological realization on the noun (N- or NP-level) via declensional endings, requiring thus an explicit indefinite determiner in a higher position than N in order to check the different features of the whole nominal.

Typologically, we can now reformulate and explain the correlations found above in Section 2: (Un)ambiguous plural and thereby (non-)countability marking in Romance does not correlate directly with the possibility of having bare arguments, but first of all with the presence or absence of a 'partitive classifier' as an important element of the newly established 'countability system'. This is the main difference, for example, between the morphological set-up of Italian and Spanish nouns: Whereas the latter possesses an overt, independent affix and unambiguous expression of plural, the former has no unambiguous plural affix thus requiring explicit 'determination' via *uno* or *del* at least for the 'countability feature'. Second, the complete loss of the Latin neuter as the second part of the Latin 'apprehension coding system' correlates with the development of an obligatorily explicit (indefinite) nominal determination (compare French with its necessity to mark both plural and countability via determiners against Italian or Spanish).

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